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ABSTRACT

Student self-expectations are believed to exert a powerful influence on performance. Student perceptions and social comparisons during transfer students' (N=1362) first semester in a large state university were examined to determine variables that might be related to the formation of student performance expectations. Subjects completed questionnaires measuring their perceptions of academic subject preparation, personal adjustment, university demands, and institutional climate, and self-comparisons with students similar and dissimilar to themselves. Cumulative grade point averages obtained for each student at the end of the second semester showed that student expectations formed during the first semester were significantly related to actual performance at the end of the first year. Results indicated that student perceptions and social comparisons were related to performance expectations. The most important predictor of student expectancies was their perception of the demands of the university, followed by social comparison with students similar to themselves. Perceptions of academic subject preparation and institutional climate, and social comparison with other students also contributed to student expectancies. The findings suggest that further research should focus on the assessment of students' expectations at the beginning of their university experience. (Author/NRB)

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Student Perceptions and Social Comparisons and
Performance Expectancy

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Student Perceptions and Social Comparisons and Performance Expectancy Formation

Student self-expectations are believed to exert a powerful influence on performance (Braun, 1976). Evidence suggests that low self-expectations can limit performance, as well as lead students to place a negative interpretation on events which are actually positive (Aronson and Mills, 1959; Kagan and Moss, 1968). It has also been found that high student expectations can influence performance in a positive direction but that student expectations may interact with other factors (Zanna, Sheras, and Cooper, 1975). Little, however, is known about the complex process by which students in a new educational environment form their expectations concerning performance in that environment.

The college student entering a new educational institution brings to the experience a set of performance expectations based upon his or her self-concept regarding educational achievement as well as naive conceptions of the nature of the new educational environment. These expectations may be modified, however, as the student engages in reality testing in the new educational setting. It is reasonable to assume that students' early performance in a new educational setting will contribute to their assessment of their likely performance. In a study of college students' second semester (Erkut, Note 1), for example, it was found that expectations were significantly related to achievement, and that they operated through first semester performance.

In addition to early feedback concerning their own performance, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) would suggest that students will compare their own performance with that of other students, and that the relationship between student expectancies and ultimate performance will be partially dependent upon the social comparison process (Rogers, Smith and Coleman, 1978).

Social comparison theory also suggests that the students will use information concerning other students most like themselves in forming expectations about their own performance.

As students' experiences with a new educational setting increase, their initial impressions of the environment undergo change. Research has demonstrated that new students' perceptions of a college environment differ from those of students who have previous experience with the institution (Pervin, 1966; Donato, 1973; Johnson and Kurpius, 1967). In addition, some evidence suggests that academic achievement is related to the congruence of students' initial expectations of the environment and the prevailing environmental press (Lauterbach and Vielhaber, 1966; Shaw, 1968), although some investigators have failed to find such a relationship (e.g., Donato, 1973).

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine student perceptions and social comparisons during the first semester of enrollment in a large state university to determine those variables which might be related to the formation of student performance expectations. The subjects for the present study were all first semester transfer students from other colleges and universities. The second purpose of the study was to determine the relationship of student performance expectancies assessed during their first semester of attendance to future academic achievement.

The variables chosen for the study included several different types of student perceptions which might be likely to relate to students' performance expectations. Measures of students' perceptions of their level of academic preparation, the demands of their present university as compared with their previous college, the supportiveness of the university climate, and their personal adaptation were included in the study. In addition, two measures of social comparison were utilized in the study--the first was a

question asking students to compare themselves with other students like themselves, in this case transfer students, and second was a question asking students to compare themselves with students different from themselves, i.e., students who had to come to the university as freshmen.

Method

Subjects and Procedures

The subjects in this study were members of the Fall 1973 entering transfer student population to a large state university. Toward the end of the fall semester, a questionnaire was mailed to all (approximately 5,000) entering transfer students. Approximately 27% of the students (1,362) returned usable questionnaires.

Measures

Expectancy measure. Students were asked to indicate on the questionnaire the grade point average (GPA) they expected to earn at the university. The item included five options: (1) below 2.00, (2) 2.00-2.49, (3) 2.50-2.99, (4) 3.00-3.49, and (5) 3.50-4.00.

Student Perception Scales. Four student perception scales were constructed from 31 items on the questionnaire after extensive item analysis. The scales included Academic Preparation, University Demands, Institutional Climate, and Personal Adjustment. The items and Cronbach alphas for each scale are included in Table 1. Academic Preparation included five items concerning students' preparation in specific content areas. These areas included English, math, social sciences, natural sciences, and languages. Each item was scored on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) "Very unprepared" to (5) "Well prepared." Scores on the five items were summed and averaged to yield the total Academic Preparation score. The University Demands scale included nine items. Seven items asked students to rate the difficulty

of coping with various aspects of their studies at the university as compared with their previous college. These items included: quantity of reading assignments; depth of comprehension expected; independence and responsibility expected; self-assertion and interaction with faculty and students; exams; written reports and term papers; and time scheduling. The items were scaled from (1) "Much more difficult at the university" to (5) "Much easier at the university." In addition, a summary item concerning the effectiveness of study techniques used at their previous college in coping with their present studies was included. This item was scaled from (1) "Very ineffective" to (5) "Very effective." An item referring to the extent to which poor performance at the university was a concern also was included. This item was scaled from (1) "Not a problem" to (5) "A very important concern," and the scores were reversed for inclusion in the University Demands scale. Scores on the nine items were summed and averaged to yield the total Academic Demands score.

The Institutional Climate scale included eight items concerning students' perceptions of the university. Five items requested students' evaluations of the quality of instruction, academic advising, personal counseling, and faculty responsiveness to questions and requests for conferences. These items were scaled from (1) "Very poor" to (5) "Excellent." An additional item was included concerning the students' perceptions of the fairness of their grade point at the university as a reflection of their work. This item was scaled from (1) "Very unfair" to (5) "Very fair." Two items asked students to rate the extent to which low academic stimulation and inadequate assistance and impersonal treatment were problems at the university. These items were scaled from (1) "Not a problem" to (5) "A very important concern," and scores reversed for inclusion in the scale. Scores

on the eight items were summed and averaged to yield the total Institutional Climate score.

The Personal Adjustment scale included nine items concerning students' personal and social life while attending the university. Six items asked students to rate the extent to which particular personal and social areas of their lives presented problems. These items included: Difficulty in adjusting to the size of the university and life in the community; social isolation; career uncertainty; marriage-engagement problems; employment-financial problems; and social interests taking too much time. These items were scaled from (1) "Not a problem" to (5) "A very important concern," and scores reversed for inclusion in the scale. In addition, two items asked students to rate the quality of friendship and social life, and extracurricular activities at the university. These items were scaled from (1) "Very poor" to (5) "Excellent." An item asking how sure students were of their choice of major was also included. This item was scaled from (1) "Very unsure" to (5) "Very sure." The scores on the nine items were summed and averaged to yield the total Personal Adjustment score.

Self-comparison with other students. Students were asked to compare themselves with other students at the university on two items. The first item asked how they feel they compare with other transfer students attending the university, and the second item asked how they feel they compare with students who entered the University as freshmen. Both items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) "Not as prepared" to (5) "Better prepared."

Performance measure. Cumulative grade point average at the end of the second semester was obtained for each student from university records.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables of interest, including GPA at the end of the first year, self-comparisons with other transfer students and with students who entered the university as freshmen, and the four student perception scales are presented in Table 2. The highest correlation between attained GPA and the other variables was found with expected GPA, $r = .56$, $p < .001$.

Insert Table 2 about here

In order to investigate the relationship between student expectations, and student perceptions and social comparisons, a stepwise multiple regression was performed on expected GPA, with the four student perception scales and two social comparison measures as the independent variables. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis.

Insert Table 3 about here

The first variable to enter the regression equation was University Demands, accounting for 17% of the variance. The second variable to enter the equation was comparison of self with other transfer students, resulting in a 5% increase in the variance accounted for. These two variables were followed by Academic Preparation, Institutional Climate, and Comparison with Nontransfer students, each accounting for an additional 1% of the variance, with Personal Adaptation, the last variable to enter the equation.

In addition, commonality analysis (Mood, 1971) was used to determine the unique contribution of the six predictor variables to student expectations.

Each of the four student perception variables and the two social comparison variables was entered into the regression equation last to determine the unique variance accounted for by each variable. The results indicated that University Demands accounted for 5% of the unique variance in student expectations, self-comparison with transfer students accounted for 2% of the unique variance, and Academic Preparation, Institutional Climate, and self-comparison with students who entered the university as freshmen, each contributed 1% of the unique variance to student expectations.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly show that student expectations formed before the end of the first semester of residence at a new institution are significantly related to actual performance at the end of the first year. The results also indicate that student perceptions and social comparisons are related to performance expectations. In this study the students' perceptions of the demands of the university proved to be the most important predictor of student expectations. The second most important predictor of expectations was social comparison with students like the students themselves. In addition, students' perceptions of academic subject preparation, institutional climate, and social comparison with other students, each contributed to their expectations concerning performance. Personal adaptation was less important than the other variables in predicting expectations concerning performance.

The fact that the students' perceptions of university demands as compared with their previous educational experience were so highly related to their expectations is reasonable and indicates that students are aware of the press of academic environments they encounter, and that their assessments are related to their performance expectations. The university

demand scale employed in the present study emphasized aspects of the university environment which are highly related to student study skills. Since study skills are amenable to instruction, these results have important implications for potential interventions by the university in regard to new students and to the students' ability to assess their need for such services.

The relationship of students' awareness of the demands of the university also has implications for pre-entry advising. If students had an accurate representation of the demands of an educational environment before entering, they would be more likely to select an institution in which they would be successful. Such information could be supplied in pre-admission advising either by personnel in the students' previous academic environment, or by pre-admission interaction with the prospective institution.

The second most important predictor of student expectancies was their self-comparison with students like themselves. The subjects employed in this study, transfer students, apparently identified other transfer students and used interactions with them and observations of their performance in assessing their own likelihood of success. This result is in line with social comparison theory, and is indicative that students who are different from the model student population are likely to be aware of themselves as a unique group. It is likely that this awareness on the part of the student could be constructively used by the university in targeting programs and securing participation of students who have special needs which go beyond those of the average college student. Such populations might include transfer students, married students, single parents, older students, and minority students.

Finally, a more complete understanding of the role of expectancies

in student performance and of the process by which student expectations are modified can only be accomplished by further research which includes the assessment of students' expectations at the beginning of their university experience. Such research would be useful in determining the effect of expectations on performance, the process and extent to which student expectations change over the initial period of adaptation, and the ways in which the university could utilize student expectancies in promoting the successful performance and adaptation of entering students.

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Table 1

Items and Cronbach Alphas on Four Student Perception Scales

Scale	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Academic Preparation	English	.57
	Mathematics	
	Social Sciences	
	Natural Sciences	
	Languages	
University Demands	Quantity of reading assignments	.75
	Depth of comprehension expected from reading assignments	
	Independence and responsibility expected in pacing and completion of study assignments	
	Self-assertion and interaction with instructor and/or other students	
	Exams	
	Written reports and term papers	
	Time scheduling, organization, and concentration	
	Effectiveness of study technique	
Institutional Climate	Low grades, lack of concentration, "freezing up" on exams, etc.	.77
	The quality of instruction	
	Academic advising	
	Faculty attitudes toward questions asked by students	
	Faculty attitudes toward requests for conference	
	Personal counseling	
	Fairness of gradepoint as a reflection of work	

Table 1 (Cont'd.)

Scale	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Institutional Climate (Cont'd.)	Low academic stimulation--boring subject matter, dull classes, etc.	
	Inadequate assistance and impersonal treatment from university staff and faculty	
Personal Adjustment	Difficulty in adjusting to the size of the university and life in the community	.63
	Social isolation--unsatisfactory social life, loneliness, etc.	
	Career uncertainty	
	Marital-engagement problems	
	Employment-financial problems	
	Social activities and other interests taking too much time	
	The quality of friendship and social life	
	Extracurricular activities	
	Sureness of major	

Table 2

Intercorrelation Matrix of GPA, Expected GPA, and Student Perception and Social Comparisons

	Expected GPA	Comparison with Transfers	Comparison with Nontransfers	University Demands	Academic Preparation	Institutional Climate	Personal Adaptation
End of Year GPA	.56 (1286)	.34 (1258)	.20 (1264)	.35 (1292)	.22 (1204)	.19 (1304)	.11 (1303)
Expected GPA		.38 (1283)	.29 (1289)	.42 (1331)	.31 (1239)	.20 (1331)	.12 (1331)
Comparison with Transfers			.44 (1287)	.46 (1291)	.42 (1203)	.11 (1307)	.27 (1306)
Comparison with Nontransfers				.30 (1297)	.28 (1206)	.09 (1314)	.16 (1313)
University Demands					.34 (1249)	.20 (1336)	.23 (1338)
Academic Preparation						.08 (1246)	.20 (1246)
Institutional Climate							.32 (1335)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent the N for each correlation.

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis with Expected GPA as the Dependent Variable

Variable	r	R	R ²	R ² Change	F to Enter	p to Enter
University Demands	.42	.42	.17	.17	242.76	.001
Comparison with Transfer Students	.38	.47	.21	.05	69.43	.001
Academic Preparation	.31	.48	.23	.01	21.67	.001
Institutional Climate	.18	.49	.24	.01	14.89	.001
Comparison with Nontransfer Students	.29	.50	.25	.01	13.41	.001
Personal Adaptation	.13	.50	.25	.003	4.69	.001

Note: Based on an N of 1126.